"Justly so. No man has the right to squander what another would give his soul for. It lessens the general respect for power."

"You are a believer in power?" The tone was sarcastic, but the sarcasm sounded thin.

"Yes. All power is the outcome of individuality, either past or present. I find no sentiment for the man who plays with it."

The quiet contempt of the tone stung Chilcote. "Do you imagine that Lexington made no fight?" he asked, impulsively. "Can't you picture the man's struggle while the vice that had been slave gradually became master?" He stopped to take breath, and in the cold pause that followed it seemed to him that the other made a murmur of incredulity.

"Perhaps you think of morphia as a pleasure?" he added. "Think of it, instead, as a tyrant—that tortures the mind if held to, and the body if cast off." Urged by the darkness and the silence of his companion, the rein of his speech had loosened. In that moment he was not Chilcote the member for East Wark, whose moods and silences were proverbial, but Chilcote the man whose mind craved the relief of speech.

"You talk as the world talks—out of ignorance and self-righteousness," he went on. "Before you condemn Lexington you should put yourself in his place"——

"As you do?" the other laughed.

Unsuspecting and inoffensive as the laugh was, it startled Chilcote. With a sudden alarm he pulled himself up.

"I?"— He tried to echo the laugh, but the attempt fell flat. "Oh, I merely speak from—from De Quincey. But I believe this fog is shifting—I really believe it is shifting. Can you oblige me with a light? I had almost forgotten that a man may still smoke though he has been deprived of sight." He spoke fast and disjointedly. He was overwhelmed by the idea that he had let himself go, and possessed by the wish to obliterate the consequences. As he talked he fumbled for his cigarette-case.

His head was bent as he searched for it nervously. Without looking up, he was conscious that the cloud of fog that held him prisoner was lifting, rolling away, closing back again, preparatory to final disappearance. Having found the case, he put a cigarette between his lips and raised his hand at the moment that the stranger drew a match across his box.

For a second each stared blankly at the other's face, suddenly made visible by the lifting of the fog. The match in the stranger's hand burned down till it scorched his fingers, and, feeling the pain, he laughed and let it drop.

"Of all odd things!" he said. Then he broke off. The circumstance was too novel for ordinary remark.

By one of those rare occurrences, those chances that seem too wild for real life and yet belong to no other sphere, the two faces so strangely hidden and strangely revealed were identical, feature for feature. It seemed to each man that he looked not at the face of another, but at his own face reflected in a flawless looking-glass.

Of the two, the stranger was the first to regain self-possession. Seeing Chilcote's bewilderment he came to his rescue with brusque tactfulness.

"The position is decidedly odd," he said. "But, after all, why should we be so surprised? Nature can't be eternally original; she must dry up sometimes, and when she gets a good model why shouldn't she use it twice?" He drew back, surveying Chilcote whimsically. "But, pardon me, you are still waiting for that light!"

Chilcote still held the cigarette between his lips. The paper had become dry, and he moistened it as he leaned toward his companion.

"Don't mind me," he said. "I'm rather—rather unstrung to-night, and this thing gave me a jar. To be candid, my imagination took head in the fog, and I got to fancy I was talking to myself"——

"And pulled up to find the fancy in some way real?"

"Yes. Something like that."

Both were silent for a moment. Chilcote pulled hard at his cigarette, then, remembering his obligations, he turned quickly to the other.

"Won't you smoke?" he asked.

The stranger accepted a cigarette from the case held out to him; and as he did so the extraordinary likeness to himself struck Chilcote with added force. Involuntarily he put out his hand and touched the other's arm.

"It's my nerves!" he said, in explanation. "They make me want to feel that you are substantial. Nerves play such beastly tricks!" He laughed awkwardly.

The other glanced up. His expression on the moment was slightly surprised, slightly contemptuous, but he changed it instantly to conventional interest. "I am afraid I am not an authority on nerves," he said.

But Chilcote was preoccupied. His thoughts had turned into another channel.

"How old are you?" he asked, suddenly.

The other did not answer immediately. "My age?" he said at last, slowly. "Oh, I believe I shall be thirty-six to-morrow—to be quite accurate."

Chilcote lifted his head quickly.

"Why do you use that tone?" he asked. "I am six months older than you, and I only wish it was six years. Six years nearer oblivion"—

Again a slight incredulous contempt crossed the other's eyes. "Oblivion?" he said. "Where are your ambitions?"

"They don't exist."

"Don't exist? Yet you voice your country? I concluded that much in the fog."

Chilcote laughed sarcastically.

"When one has voiced one's country for six years one gets hoarse—it's a natural consequence."

The other smiled. "Ah, discontent!" he said. "The modern canker. But we must both be getting under way. Good night! Shall we shake hands—to prove that we are genuinely material?"

Chilcote had been standing unusually still, following the stranger's words—caught by his self-reliance and impressed by his personality. Now, as he ceased to speak, he moved quickly forward, impelled by a nervous curiosity.

"Why should we just hail each other and pass—like the proverbial ships?" he said, impulsively. "If Nature was careless enough to let the reproduction meet the original, she must abide the consequences."

The other laughed, but his laugh was short. "Oh, I don't know. Our roads lie differently. You would get nothing out of me, and I"— He stopped and again laughed shortly. "No," he said; "I'd be content to pass, if I were you. The unsuccessful man is seldom a profitable study. Shall we say good night?"

He took Chilcote's hand for an instant; then, crossing the footpath, he passed into the roadway toward the Strand.

It was done in a moment; but with his going a sense of loss fell upon Chilcote. He stood for a space, newly conscious of unfamiliar faces and unfamiliar voices in the stream of passers-by; then, suddenly mastered by an impulse, he wheeled rapidly and darted after the tall, lean figure so ridiculously like his own.

Half-way across Trafalgar Square he overtook the stranger. He had paused on one of the small stone islands that break the current of traffic, and was waiting for an opportunity to cross the street. In the glare of light from the lamp above his head, Chilcote saw for the first time that, under a remarkable neatness of appearance, his clothes were well worn—almost shabby. The discovery struck him with something stronger than surprise. The idea of poverty seemed incongruous in connection with the reliance, the reserve, the personality of the man. With a certain embarrassed haste he stepped forward and touched his arm.

"Look here," he said, as the other turned quietly, "I have followed you to exchange cards. It can't injure either of us, and I—I have a wish to know my other self." He laughed nervously as he drew out his card-case.

The stranger watched him in silence. There was the same faint contempt, but also there was a reluctant interest in his glance, as it passed from the fingers fumbling with the case to the pale face with the square jaw, straight mouth, and level eyebrows drawn low over the gray eyes. When at last the card was held out to him he took it without remark and slipped it into his pocket.

Chilcote looked at him eagerly. "Now the exchange?" he said.

For a second the stranger did not respond. Then, almost unexpectedly, he smiled.

"After all, if it amuses you"— he said; and, searching in his waistcoat pocket, he drew out the required card.

"It will leave you quite unenlightened," he added. "The name of a failure never spells anything." With another smile, partly amused, partly ironical, he stepped from the little island and disappeared into the throng of traffic.

Chilcote stood for an instant gazing at the point where he had vanished; then, turning to the lamp, he lifted the card and read the name it bore: "Mr. John Loder, 13 Clifford's Inn."

II.—A BAD MORNING.

ON the morning following the night of fog Chilcote woke at nine. He woke at the moment that his man Allsopp tiptoed across the room and laid the salver with his early cup of tea on the table beside the bed.

For several seconds he lay with his eyes shut; the effort of opening them on a fresh day—the intimate certainty of what he would see on opening them—seemed to weight his lids. The heavy, half-closed curtains; the blinds severely drawn; the great room with its splendid furniture, its sober coloring, its scent of damp London winter; above all, Allsopp, silent, respectful and respectable—were things to dread.

A full minute passed while he still feigned sleep. He heard Allsopp stir discreetly, then the inevitable information broke the silence:

"Nine o'clock, sir!"

He opened his eyes, murmured something, and closed them again.

The man moved to the window, quietly pulled back the curtains and half drew the blind.

"Better night, sir, I hope?" he ventured, softly.

Chilcote had drawn the bedclothes over his face to screen himself from the daylight, murky though it was.

"Yes," he responded. "Those beastly nightmares didn't trouble me, for once." He shivered a little as at some recollection. "But don't talk—don't remind me of them. I hate a man who has no originality." He spoke sharply. At times he showed an almost childish irritation over trivial things.

Allsopp took the remark in silence. Crossing the wide room he began to lay out his master's clothes. The action affected Chilcote to fresh annoyance.

"Confound it!" he said. "I'm sick of that routine. I can see you laying out my winding sheet the day of my burial. Leave those things. Come back in half an hour."

Allsopp allowed himself one glance at his master's figure huddled in the great bed; then, laying aside the coat he was holding, he moved to the door. With his fingers on the handle he paused.

"Will you breakfast in your own room, sir—or downstairs?"

Chilcote drew the clothes more tightly round his shoulders. "Oh, anywhere—nowhere!" he said. "I don't care."

Allsopp softly withdrew.

Left to himself, Chilcote sat up in bed and lifted the salver to his knees. The sudden movement jarred him physically; he drew a handkerchief from under the pillow and wiped his forehead; then he held his hand to the light and studied it. The hand looked sallow and unsteady. With a nervous gesture he thrust the salver back upon the table and slid out of bed.

Moving hastily across the room, he stepped before one of the tall wardrobes and swung the door open; then after a furtive glance around the room he thrust his hand into the recesses of a shelf and fumbled there. The thing he sought was evidently not hard to find, for almost at once he withdrew his hand and moved from the wardrobe to a table beside the fireplace, carrying a small glass tube filled with tabloids.

On the table were a decanter, a siphon, and a waterjug. Mixing some whiskey, he uncorked the tube, again he glanced apprehensively toward the door, then with a very nervous hand dropped two tabloids into the glass.

While they dissolved he stood with his hand on the table and his eyes fixed on the floor, evidently restraining his impatience. Instantly they had disappeared he seized the glass and drained it at a draught, replaced the bottle in the wardrobe, and, shivering slightly in the raw air, slipped back into bed.

When Allsopp returned he was sitting up, a cigarette between his lips, the teacup standing empty on the salver. The nervous irritability had gone from his manner. He no longer moved jerkily, his eyes looked brighter, his pale skin more healthy.

"Ah, Allsopp," he said, "there are some moments in life, after all. It isn't all blank wall."

"I ordered breakfast in the small morning-room, sir, said Allsopp, without a change of expression.

Chilcote breakfasted at ten. His appetite, always fickle, was particularly uncertain in the early hours. He helped himself to some fish, but sent away his plate untouched; then, having drunk two cups of tea, he pushed back his chair, lighted a fresh cigarette, and shook out the morning's newspaper.

Twice he shook it out and twice turned it, but the reluctance to fix his mind upon it made him dally. The effect of the morphia tabloids was still apparent in the greater steadiness of his hand and eye, the regained quiet of his susceptibilities, but the respite was temporary and lethargic. The early days—the days of six years ago, when these tabloids meant an even sweep of thought, lucidity of brain, a balance of judgment in thought and effort—were days of the past. As he had said of Lexington and his vice, the slave had become master.

As he folded the paper in a last attempt at interest, the door opened and his secretary came a step or two into the room.

"Good morning, sir!" he said. "Forgive me for being so untimely."

He was a fresh-mannered, bright-eyed boy of twenty-three. His breezy alertness, his deference, as to a man who had attained what he aspired to, amused and depressed Chilcote by turns.

"Good morning, Blessington. What is it now?" He sighed through habit, and, putting up his hand, warded off a ray of sun that had forced itself through the misty atmosphere as if by mistake.

The boy smiled. "It's that business of the Wark timber contract, sir," he said. "You promised you'd look into it to-day; you know you've shelved it for a week already, and Craig, Burnage are rather clamoring for an answer." He moved forward and laid the papers he was carrying on the table beside Chilcote. "I'm sorry to be such a nuisance," he added. "I hope your nerves aren't worrying you to-day?"

Chilcote was toying with the papers. At the word nerves he glanced up suspiciously. But Blessington's ingenuous face satisfied him.

"No," he said. "I settled my nerves last night with—with a bromide. I knew that fog would upset me unless I took precautions."

"I'm glad of that, sir—though I'd avoid bromides. Bad habit to set up. But this Wark business—I'd like to get it under way, if you have no objection."

Chilcote passed his fingers over the papers. "Were you out in that fog last night, Blessington?"

"No, sir. I supped with some people at the Savoy, and we just missed it. It was very partial, I believe."

"So I believe."

Blessington put his hand to his neat tie and pulled it. He was extremely polite, but he had an inordinate sense of duty.

"Forgive me, sir," he said, "but about that contract—I know I'm a frightful bore."

"Oh, the contract!" Chilcote looked about him absently. "By the way, did you see anything of my wife yesterday? What did she do last night?"

"Mrs. Chilcote gave me tea yesterday afternoon. She told me she was dining at Lady Sabinet's, and looking in at one or two places later." He eyed his papers in Chilcote's listless hand.

Chilcote smiled satirically. "Eve is very true to society," he said. "I couldn't dine at the Sabinets' if it was to make me premier. They have a butler who is an institution—a sort of heirloom in the family. He is fat, and breathes audibly. Last time I lunched there he haunted me for a whole night."

Blessington laughed gayly. "Mrs. Chilcote doesn't see ghosts, sir," he said; "but if I may suggest"——

Chilcote tapped his fingers on the table.

"No. Eve doesn't see ghosts. We rather miss sympathy there."

Blessington governed his impatience. He stood still for some seconds, then glanced down at his pointed boot.

"If you will be lenient to my persistency, sir, I would like to remind you"——

Chilcote lifted his head with a flash of irritability.

"Confound it, Blessington!" he exclaimed. "Am I never to be left in peace? Am I never to sit down to a meal without having work thrust upon me? Work—work—perpetually work? I have heard no other word in the last six years. I declare there are times"—he rose suddenly from his seat and turned to the window—"there are times when I feel that for sixpence I'd chuck it all—the whole beastly round"——

Startled by his vehemence, Blessington wheeled toward him.

"Not your political career, sir?"

There was a moment in which Chilcote hesitated, a moment in which the desire that had filled his mind for months rose to his lips and hung there; then the question, the incredulity in Blessington's face, chilled it and it fell back into silence.

"I—I didn't say that," he murmured. "You young men jump to conclusions, Blessington."

"Forgive me, sir. I never meant to imply retirement. Why, Rickshaw, Vale, Cressham, and the whole Wark crowd would be about your ears like flies if such a thing were even breathed—now more than ever, since these Persian rumors. By the way, is there anything real in this border business? The St. George's came out rather strong last night."

Chilcote had moved back to the table. His face was pale from his outburst and his fingers toyed restlessly with the open newspaper.

"I haven't see the St. George's," he said hastily. "Lakely is always ready to shake the red rag where Russia is concerned; whether we are to enter the arena is another matter. But what about Craig, Burnage? I think you mentioned something of a contract."

"Oh, don't worry about that, sir." Blessington had caught the twitching at the corners of Chilcote's mouth, the nervous sharpness of his voice. "I can put Craig, Burnage off. If they have an answer by Thursday it will be time enough." He began to collect his papers, but Chilcote stopped him.

"Wait," he said, veering suddenly. "Wait. I'll see to it now. I'll feel more myself when I've done something. I'll come with you to the study."

He walked hastily across the room; then, with his hand on the door, he paused.

"You go first, Blessington," he said. "I'll—I'll follow you in ten minutes. I must glance through the newspapers first."

Blessington looked uncertain. "You won't forget, sir?"

"Forget? Of course not."

Still doubtfully, Blessington left the room and closed the door.

Once alone, Chilcote walked slowly back to the table, drew up his chair, and sat down with his eyes on the white cloth, the paper lying unheeded beside him.

Time passed. A servant came into the room to remove the breakfast. Chilcote moved slightly when necessary, but otherwise retained his attitude. The servant, having finished his task, replenished the fire and left the room. Chilcote still sat on.

At last, feeling numbed, he rose and crossed to the fireplace. The clock on the mantel-piece stared him in the face. He looked at it, started slightly, then drew out his watch. Watch and clock corresponded. Each marked twelve o'clock. With a nervous motion he leaned forward and pressed the electric bell long and hard.

Instantly a servant answered.

"Is Mr. Blessington in the study?" Chilcote asked.

"He was there, sir, five minutes back."

Chilcote looked relieved.

"All right! Tell him I have gone out—had to go out. Something important. You understand?"

"I understand, sir."

But before the words had been properly spoken Chilcote had passed the man and walked into the hall.

III.—THE CRYSTAL BALL.

LEAVING his house, Chilcote walked forward quickly and aimlessly. With the sting of the outer air the recollection of last night's adventure came back upon him. Since the hour of his waking it had hung about with vague persistence, but now in the clear light of day it seemed to stand out with a fuller peculiarity.

The thing was preposterous, nevertheless it was genuine. He was wearing the overcoat he had worn the night before, and, acting on impulse, he thrust his hand into the pocket and drew out the stranger's card.

"Mr. John Loder!" He read the name over as he walked along, and it mechanically repeated itself in his brain—falling into measure with his steps. Who was John Loder? What was he? The questions tantalized him till his pace unconsciously increased. The thought that two men so absurdly alike could inhabit the same city and remain unknown to each other faced him as a problem; it tangled with his personal worries and aggravated them. There seemed to be almost a danger in such an extraordinary likeness. He began to regret his impetuosity in thrusting his card upon the man. Then, again, how he had let himself go on the subject of Lexington! How narrowly he had escaped compromise! He turned hot and cold at the recollection of what he had said and what he might have said. Then for the first time he paused in his walk and looked about him.

On leaving Grosvenor Square he had turned westward, moving rapidly till the Marble Arch was reached; there, still oblivious to his surroundings, he had crossed the roadway to the Edgware Road, passing along it to the labyrinth of shabby streets that lie behind Paddington. Now, as he glanced about him, he saw with some surprise how far he had come.

The damp remnants of the fog still hung about the housetops in a filmy veil; there were no glimpses of green to break the monotony of tone; all was quiet, dingy, neglected. But to Chilcote the shabbiness was restful, the subdued atmosphere a satisfaction. Among these sad houses, these passers-by, each filled with his own concerns, he experienced a sense of respite and relief. In the fashionable streets that bounded his own horizon, if a man paused in his walk to work out an idea, he instantly drew a crowd of inquisitive or contemptuous eyes; here, if a man halted for half an hour, it was nobody's business but his own.

Enjoying this thought, he wandered on for close upon an hour, moving from one street to another with steps that were listless or rapid, as inclination prompted; then, still acting with vagrant aimlessness, he stopped in his wanderings and entered a small eating-house.

The place was low-ceiled and dirty, the air hot and steaming with the smell of food, but Chilcote passed through the door and moved to one of the tables with no expression of disgust, and with far less furtive watchfulness than he used in his own house. By a curious mental twist he felt greater freedom, larger opportunities in drab surroundings such as these than in the broad issues and weighty responsibilities of his own life. Choosing a corner seat, he called for coffee; and there, protected by shadow and wrapped in cigarette smoke, he set about imagining himself some vagrant unit who had slipped his moorings and was blissfully adrift.

The imagination was pleasant while it lasted, but with him nothing was permanent. Of late the greater part of his sufferings had been comprised in the irritable fickleness of all his aims—the distaste for and impossibility of sustained effort in any direction. He had barely lighted a second cigarette when the old restlessness fell upon him; he stirred nervously in his seat, and the cigarette was scarcely burned out when he rose, paid his small bill, and left the shop.

Outside on the pavement he halted, pulled out his watch, and saw that two hours stretched in front before any appointment claimed his attention. He wondered vaguely where he might go to—what he might do in those two hours? In the last few minutes a distaste for solitude had risen in his mind, giving the close street a loneliness that had escaped him before.

As he stood wavering a cab passed slowly down the street. The sight of a well-dressed man roused the cabman; flicking his whip, he passed Chilcote close, feigning to pull up.

The cab suggested civilization. Chilcote's mind veered suddenly and he raised his hand. The vehicle stopped and he climbed in.

"Where, sir?" The cabman peered down through the roof-door.

Chilcote raised his head. "Oh, anywhere near Pall Mall," he said. Then, as the horse started forward he put up his hand and shook the trap-door. "Wait!" he called. "I've changed my mind. Drive to Cadogan Gardens—No. 33."

The distance to Cadogan Gardens was covered quickly. Chilcote had hardly realized that his destination was reached when the cab pulled up. Jumping out, he paid the fare and walked quickly to the hall door of No. 33.

"Is Lady Astrupp at home?" he asked, sharply, as the door swung back in answer to his knock.

The servant drew back deferentially. "Her ladyship has almost finished lunch, sir," he said.

For answer Chilcote stepped through the doorway and walked half way across the hall.

"All right," he said. "But don't disturb her on my account. I'll wait in the white room till she has finished." And, without taking further notice of the servant, he began to mount the stairs.

In the room where he had chosen to wait a pleasant wood fire brightened the dull January afternoon and softened the thick, white curtains, the gilt furniture, and the Venetian vases filled with white roses. Moving straight forward, Chilcote paused by the grate and stretched his hands to the blaze; then, with his usual instability, he turned and passed to a couch that stood a yard or two away.

On the couch, tucked away between a novel and a crystal gazing-ball, was a white Persian kitten, fast asleep. Chilcote picked up the ball and held it between his eyes and the fire; then he laughed superciliously, tossed it back into its place, and caught the kitten's tail. The little animal stirred, stretched itself, and began to purr. At the same moment the door of the room opened.

Chilcote turned round. "I particularly said you were not to be disturbed," he began. "Have I merited displeasure?" He spoke fast, with the uneasy tone that so often underran his words.

Lady Astrupp took his hand with a confiding gesture and smiled.

"Never displeasure," she said, lingeringly, and again she smiled. The smile might have struck a close observer as faintly artificial. But what man in Chilcote's frame of mind has time to be observant where women are concerned? The manner of the smile was very sweet and almost caressing—and that sufficed.

"What have you been doing?" she asked, after a moment. "I thought I was quite forgotten." She moved across to the couch, picked up the kitten, and kissed it. "Isn't this sweet?" she added.

She looked very graceful as she turned, holding the little animal up. She was a woman of twenty-seven, but she looked a girl. The outline of her face was pure, the pale gold of her hair almost ethereal, and her tall, slight figure still suggested the suppleness, the possibility of future development, that belongs to youth. She wore a lace-colored gown that harmonized with the room and with the delicacy of her skin.

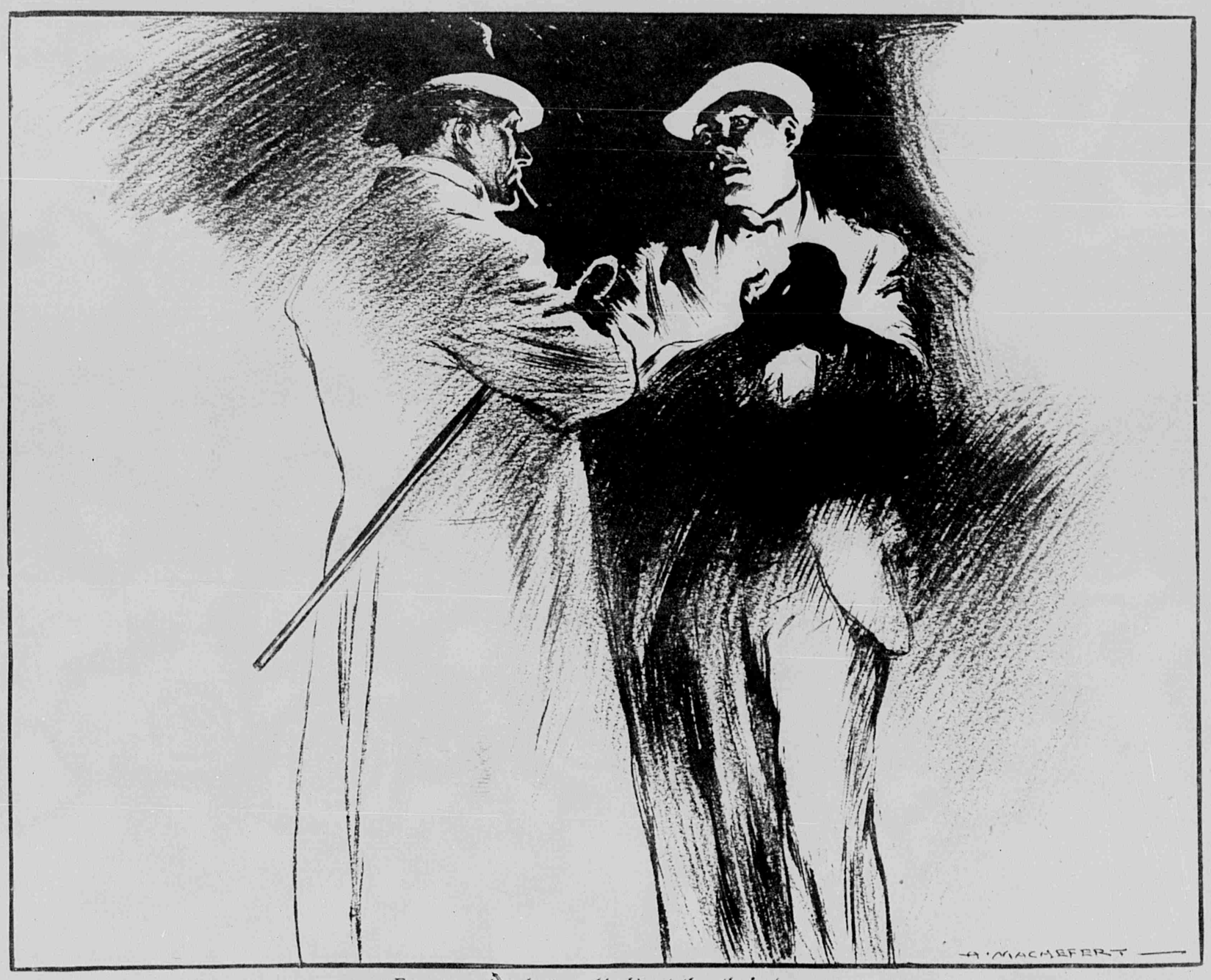
"Now sit down and rest—or walk about the room, I shan't mind which." She nestled into the couch and picked up the crystal ball.

"What is the toy for?" Chilcote looked at her from the mantel-piece, against which he was resting. He had never defined the precise attraction that Lillian Astrupp held for him. Her shallowness soothed him; her inconsequent egotism helped him to forget himself. She never asked him how he was, she never expected impossibilities. She let him come and go and act as he pleased, never demanding reasons. Like the kitten, she was charming and graceful and easily amused; it was possible that, also like the kitten, she could scratch and be spiteful on occasion, but that did not weigh with him. He sometimes expressed a vague envy of the late Lord Astrupp; but, even had circumstances permitted, it is doubtful whether he would have chosen to be his successor. Lillian as a friend was delightful, but Lillian as a wife would have been a different consideration.

"What is the toy for?" he asked again.

She looked up slowly. "How cruel of you, Jack! It is my very latest hobby."

It was part of her attraction that she was never



For a second each stared blankly at the other's face.